

Catherine Colby

Wheelock Academy Model for the Indian Territory

Oklahoma is now home to the largest American Indian population in the country. In a single decade, beginning in 1830, the federal relocation policy brought approximately 100,000 American Indians from every direction into the Indian Territory. In the period between their arrival and formation of the state in 1907, those who survived the trek from the southeast established their tribal institutions in the new territory. They were called the Five Civilized Tribes: the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw.

The first constitution written and adopted within the limits of Oklahoma was that of the Choctaw Nation in June of 1834.¹ Their governing, judicial, and educational systems were effective for over 70 years. Control of Choctaw educational institutions and policy passed into federal hands with statehood in 1906. It was Chief Allen Wright who suggested the name, “Okla Homma” for the new state. Freely translated from the Choctaw, it means: home of the red people.

Several structural reminders of this historically-significant era of American Indian history

are now National Historic Landmarks, including the Cherokee National Capitol, Murrell House, Creek National Capitol, and the Wheelock Academy, near Millerton, in the southeast corner of the state. Survival of the buildings remaining at this highly significant site is a real concern. Over the past decade the National Register Programs offices of the NPS in Denver, Colorado (and now in Santa Fe, New Mexico) have provided technical assistance to owners of nationally-significant structures. The Wheelock Academy is the most recent to have a Condition Assessment Report, scheduled to be completed this year. A Condition Assessment Report is prepared by preservation professionals. It identifies work needed to preserve the structure, prioritized on the basis of their importance to the character of the structure and their condition. Cost estimates are also provided. These reports can serve to guide planning and preservation work, and can be used as a tool for fundraising.

History

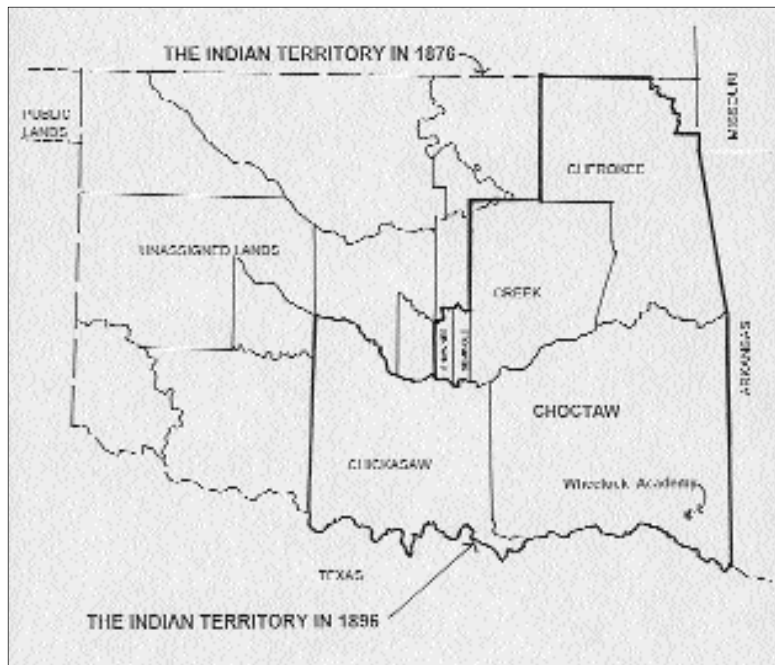
Among the earliest of the tribes to be relocated to Indian Territory were several groups of Choctaws. All of the Five Civilized Tribes were already well known for their concern for education. In 1820, the Choctaw Council had voted to use all Government annuities to support their schools. Around 1840, a Union agent stated that “in no community does the education of the young men and women receive greater encouragement than among the five tribes.”² These schools were paid for and controlled by the tribal council, and there were 12 neighborhood schools in operation in the Choctaw Nation by 1838.

Built around 1832, the Wheelock Academy was one of the earliest schools. It set the precedent for over 30 academies and seminaries maintained in Indian Territory. By 1839, the influx of boarding students was so great that a large, two story frame dormitory was added to the campus. Begun as a mission school for girls, it was selected in 1842 to become the first Choctaw National Academy. The school was named after Eleazar Wheelock, founder of Moor’s Indian School, later to become known as Dartmouth College.

Wheelock Academy was liberally endowed, attracted qualified teachers, and had a reputation for high academic

Wheelock Academy NHL, McCurtain County, OK. Old seminary building. Courtesy NPS.





Map of Oklahoma showing the Indian Territory in 1876, with the location of the Wheelock Academy added. Map by Catherine Colby, after Atlas of the North American Indian by Carl Waldman, illustrated by Molly Braun. (Facts on File, New York, 1985).

excellence. Its curriculum included natural philosophy, algebra, astronomy, history, Greek, and Latin. It provided “a judicious blend of cultural uplift and practical skills.”³ In 1932, Wheelock became a regular U.S. Indian School. Writing in the early 1950s, Muriel Wright stated that orphans and underprivileged Choctaw children were being sent to one or another of the several remaining Indian schools in eastern Oklahoma, including Wheelock Academy for girls and Jones Academy for boys.⁴ Finally, in 1955, after 123 years of service, the Wheelock campus closed when the school merged with the nearby Jones Academy. Today, approximately 90% of Choctaw children attend public schools.

The Old Seminary Building Architecture

The original campus was all but destroyed by fire in 1869. The rebuilding process between 1880 and 1884 resulted in 17 buildings on the approximately 15 acre site. Besides the school and dormitory buildings, others included a new clinic, barn, office, laundry and utility buildings. But of the 16 buildings extant in 1974, only six remained four years later.

The Old Seminary Building was the first structure to be built after the fire. It is a two-story wood frame structure. Irregularly shaped, it has a metal hipped roof with pairs of brackets at eaves, and clapboard siding. A rectangular bell tower with a pyramidal roof rises from the south side of the roof. The evenly spaced windows are two-over-two wood double-hung sash. At the south side is a two-story porch added in the 1940s, which is in poor condition. The porch remains open on the ground floor, although the upper floor has been enclosed.

The NHL Condition Assessment

As part of its initiative to assist National Historic Landmark owners, and as funding permits, the NPS provides technical preservation assistance. The NPS is providing a condition assessment of the Wheelock Academy to help the owners plan for the preservation of the structure. A condition assessment begins with an in-depth site inspection. Based on this is an analysis of the physical condition of the building, and identification of the specific work needed to preserve it. The various types of treatments are listed in order of priority, along with rough cost estimates for carrying out the work. The comprehensive field inspection is conducted by a team of historical architects, who provide documentation in the form of photographs, a site plan sketch, and floor plans. They also describe the history and significance of the site along with the recommendations for preservation or rehabilitation. This information assists owners in determining what treatments will have the least impact upon those historic qualities which led to the building's designation as an National Historic Landmark.

Because it is now vacant, the treatments to be recommended for the Old Seminary Building will result in its protection from the effects of weather and vandalism. The optimal treatment, however would be the determination of a new use and rehabilitation of this important representative of American history.

Wilma Rogers, the Director of Tribal Development, is working with representatives of the Oklahoma Historical Society and the NPS to find a new use for the campus. This compound of buildings complete with a lake deserves not just physical preservation but reuse as a home to lively activity benefitting the Choctaw Nation.

Notes

- ¹ Muriel H. Wright. *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, vol. 33, Civilization of the American Indian Series (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951; ninth edition, 1986), p. 101.
- ² Rennard Strickland. *Indians of Oklahoma*, Newcomers to a New Land Series (Norman and London University of Oklahoma Press: 1980, fourth printing, 1989), p. 44.
- ³ Joseph Scott Mendinghall, “Wheelock Academy, Millerton, Oklahoma,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination, September 10, 1978.
- ⁴ Wright, op. cit., p. 17.

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